
Interview: John Rechy

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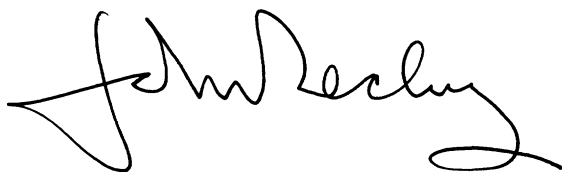
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INTERVIEW



JOHN RECHY

Outlaw Aesthetics

Debra Castillo: You have said, understandably, that you don't like labels. Among the labels that have stuck are those of "gay writer," "outlaw," "hustler-novelist." I agree that such pigeonholing is very restricting, but what (if any) is the good side?

John Rechy: I'll paraphrase Descartes: "We are seen, therefore we are." At one time the label "gay writer," while always being restrictive, announced visibility; that we were here. For very long, in literature and art—and in life—just the mention of gay subjects was forbidden. That gave rise to the necessary art of subtle but powerful "camouflage," "infiltration," and "sabotage" discussed later on. It also, alas, gave rise to "passing/collaborating." Once the phrase "gay writer" occurred, homosexuality existed as a subject in literature. That should have been a first step in the evolution toward the discarding of labels. That hasn't happened. The result is a dangerous "literary ghetto."

Paradoxically in the name of liberation, minority literature is being shoved away, into a "ghetto." Bookstore chains often have shelves labeled "alternative lifestyles," "Chicano literature," "black literature." That's segregation. Every few years, the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Nation*, others, publish patronizing "round-up" articles that purport to identify the "most important" Chicano writers or gay writers—I believe they've backed away from black writers, but not entirely from women. That the result is "ghettoization" is clear when you try to imagine a similar round-up of male heterosexual writers.

When John Updike is routinely identified in book-review journals as a "self-avowed heterosexual," I won't mind being identified as a "self-avowed homosexual," although I don't remember having taken a vow about sexuality, whereas I suspect Updike may have done just that.

Labeled by sexual persuasion, ethnicity, or the gender of a writer, such literature is guaranteed a restricted audience of like identification. Very few (one or two, *if any!*)—the least threatening—may find their way into English Departments that too often disdain minority voices. A few more may find a place in prestigious Chicano Studies courses. There, however, heavy emphasis is sometimes placed on political requirements over literary quality; a further separation occurs, a ghetto within a ghetto, where arguments might occur about who is or is not a "real Chicano writer."

Forgive the passion: Since as far back as 1959, I was writing about "Mexican-Americans," and identifying myself as such, in the *Nation*, *Evergreen Review*, *Saturday Review*. In virtually all my novels, the protagonist's mother is Mexican, like mine. Still, I've known the question to be asked, whether or not I'm a "real Chicano writer." Why? Because I wrote also about homosexuality?

Castillo: What distinction would you make between "outlaw" and "outcast"?

Rechy: "Outcast" suggests a cowering exile, victimized, defeated. "Outlaw" suggests defiance, an acceptance of being "outside the law." It carries an implication that the law itself may be wrong, therefore to be questioned, overturned. Oh, yes, let's face it, the "outlaw" is a romantic figure.

Castillo: The emergence of “queer theory” has been much discussed recently. What impact do you foresee or have you seen (for example, possibilities for exposing the contingency of heterosexuality and whiteness as normalizing functions)?

Rechy: Background first: At one time I refused to use the word “gay.” I agreed with my friend Christopher Isherwood that it made us sound like “bliss ninnies.” Some say the word originated around the late nineteenth century and described women in the theater and, by extension, “loose women,” then transvestites. For years I continued to say “homosexual,” not agreeing that an emphasis on sexual persuasion was all that bad, especially when it was that persuasion that branded us. Now I don’t hesitate to use the word “gay,” although it’s a word I still dislike.

I doubt, though, that I’ll ever use the word “queer” in reference to myself, other homosexuals, or in the context of theory. For men of my generation, and indeed even newer generations, that word is fraught with hatred and violence. I understand the concept behind the use of the word, defusing its power. But if you apply that theory to other words—say, some of the ugliest references to women, black people, Jews—you end up with quite a dictionary of offensive words permitted.

Essential in “normalizing” homosexuality within the horizon of acceptability is this consideration: Homosexuals are the only minority *born* into the opposing camp; call it the “enemy camp.” All other minorities are born into supportive environments—blacks into black families, Chicanos into Chicano families. (“Chicano” is another word I use but have difficulty with because in my childhood it was a term “Mexicans”—that’s what we called ourselves—used to demean other Mexicans, a class distinction.) For that reason it’s impossible to reconcile problems that deal with homosexuality with those of other minorities. Allegiances must be forged, yes, but differences must be acknowledged and dealt with. Among those: early on, homosexuals are forced to camouflage, pretend to be what we’re not; we learn to mime, to “pass.” (“Passing” is much easier, of course, for a homosexual than a black person or a Hispanic, generally more clearly identifiable by physical appearance.)

Before the subject of homosexuality was permitted in art, artists learned the effectiveness of infiltration and sabotage—Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Djuna Barnes, André Gide, García Lorca, Carson McCullers. Through their “gay sensibility,” they communicated among homosexuals and, subliminally, “informed” and therefore taught heterosexuals. I didn’t have to know that Tennessee Williams was gay to recognize that *A Streetcar Named Desire* was written by a gay man; no one other than a gay man could have created Blanche DuBois nor—importantly—Stanley Kowalski (mirror images, gender reversed). Edward Albee becomes very irked when *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is spoken of in gay terms. I understand why, because critics at the time were vitriolically homophobic and reputations could be easily smashed—and he certainly was under virulent attack from those heterosexual critics, who may have driven him away from Broadway.

Still, that play is clearly written by a gay man. Part of its accomplishment is that it functions *both* as an exploration of a heterosexual marriage as well as a homosexual relationship. The “gay sensibility” does not in any way restrict the artist from illuminating *all* aspects of human experience; indeed, it may enrich by a broadened perspective. I think there is more astute revelation of heterosexual relationships in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* than in all of Philip Roth’s aggressively “heterosexual-male” explorations. Visconti, Almodóvar, Fassbinder—those artists have at one time or another all practiced the art of infiltration and sabotage through deliberate camouflage.

Castillo: How does “camouflage” function?

Rechy: Camouflage occurs when a gay subject is introduced without identification (as per Albee’s play), allowing the sensibility to infiltrate. Once infiltration occurs, sabotage of entrenched myths is possible. There are, unfortunately, collaborators on the

front lines: often closeted artists (I don't know how to account for the fact that so many of them are critics!) who turn against their own. Today's gay writers might learn from the tactics of past noble literary saboteurs and infiltrators, in order to push our literature back into the so-called "mainstream" of art.

Castillo: I've noticed that you put women and gays together in the literary ghetto you're describing.

Rechy: I believe that the basis of antihomosexuality lies in antiwoman attitudes. The majority of heterosexual males see women as inferior. Since women are supposed to desire men, a man who desires another man must have abdicated at least some of his superior "maleness." The homosexual male, therefore, is looked down on as a betrayer of machismo—"heterosexualismo."

Of course there are many paradoxes and subterfuges: The reason institutions that celebrate heterosexual male bonding—police departments, the armed forces, etc.—resist so passionately the recruitment of openly gay men (although their ranks abound with secret homosexuals) is that such openly gay men expose the hidden sexual desire at the core of "heterosexual-male bonding." In the army and police departments, men are able to sleep together, shower together, grope each other (yes, it's heterosexual men who grope each other in army showers), be exclusively and intimately in each other's company, and still deny sexual desire, a denial gay men would threaten by their open presence within, and attraction to, the same exclusively male milieu.

Castillo: And in relation to the literary and academic milieus?

Rechy: There's much political confusion on the minority-literary front lines. At the 1992 International Book Fair in Guadalajara, I was accosted by a Chicano poet compiling some kind of list of Chicano writers. He was taking issue with me about my remarks about the restrictiveness resulting from being identified as a "Chicano writer." "You want me to remove you from my list?" he threatened, as if he was now embarked on creating a new "400."

Another confusion: the current mythology that gay, Chicano, or women's liberation begins at a designated point, and everything before that exemplifies, even upholds, "repression." Staunch warriors who fought lonely—and very dangerous—battles are discarded. Recent purported evaluations of gay literature virtually all entrench the untruth that is now an accepted cliché—that gay liberation began on the last weekend in July 1969 in New York, when drag queens resisted arrest and fought the police making what was then considered a routine raid. At that point—current gay literary recorders claim—gay writers rushed out of the closet, freed of all repressive attitudes of centuries, and instantly produced "liberated literature."

The Violet Quill, a recent book given major attention in some mainstream publications, not only perpetuates that mythology, but puts current gay literature exclusively in the hands of seven white male writers—of vastly varying talents (two of the best, exceptional, are now dead of AIDS)—a group that, as chronicled in that book, shared extravagant desserts during only eight literary-evening chats in Manhattan—and must have waved at each other more frequently at Fire Island.

No more repression in literature since Stonewall? Consider romantically tortured gay men pining after impossible figures of desire (often "straight"); consider "doomed Fire Island queens"; consider rampaging sadists violating the objects of their lust—all these characters populate the books of three writers currently held up as heralds of a liberated gay literature. Add to that only two salient manifestations of "new liberated attitudes": the current panting adulation (by safe, middle-class camp-followers of "low-life") of the quintessential figure of gay self-hatred, Genet, with his lyrical celebration of "trade"—often gay-bashers; and add to that Edmund White's leering attempted conversion of Maria Felix into a fag hag in his recent article in *Vanity Fair*. The picture that emerges of our attitudes is not quite "liberated."

Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge*, William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, Isherwood's deceptively genteel *A Single Man*, other novels published before Stonewall—each, in its own way and by itself, possesses more insurrectionary power, more defiance, than the half dozen or so vaunted novels that now form the misguided canon of post-Stonewall “liberated” gay lit.

A personal note may be forgiven: in virtually all the recent volumes that purport to explore gay literature, only my first novel, *City of Night*, is discussed, in the pre-Stonewall period. Yet I've continued to explore gay subjects in every one of my novels into the present. Ignored in those restrictive explorations of “Stonewall literature” are: *Numbers* (1967), in which the protagonist begins to move away from the more repressive area of hustling to the freer arena of cruising; *This Day's Death* (1969), which records an arrest for a gay encounter; *The Sexual Outlaw* (1977), a document of outrage at persecution; and *Rushes* (1979), which (beyond my intention since no one could foresee anything as monstrous as AIDS emerging) records the end of the era of profligate sex, and does so with a saddened, resigned benediction at the end. My latest novel, *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (1992), explores the conflict of a Mexican woman who discovers her son is homosexual.

Why is the work of many writers who wrote before and continued to write after the riot in New York ignored? Because to acknowledge such work would question the spurious notion that a new, liberated literature emerged only from writers (mostly New York friends) who began to publish after Stonewall. A careful examination of that myth would discover an emergent consciousness that had little to do with Stonewall. That would force a re-evaluation, a correct locating of that major event as only one of many significant steps toward liberation. Years before Stonewall, powerful organized protests and resistance against antigay authorities occurred in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Another trademark of this limited gay criticism is the negative questioning of “stereotypes.” That enrages me, the rejecting of those shock troops of revolution, outlawed outlaws. It was the “*flaming queens*” who most often resisted arrest during raids, including at the Stonewall Inn. Inspected closely—on the various battlefronts—gay, Chicano, black, feminist “stereotypes” often reveal themselves to be the earliest sources of confrontational rebellion.

Castillo: Numerous artists and authors since the mid-eighties have been turning their artistic endeavors to writing the AIDS tragedy. Can you comment on the interrelation of social awareness and cultural form?

Rechy: Whether HIV-positive or not, every gay artist has been jarred into an awareness of cruel, early death, as obituaries columns extend daily. Every gay man who was sexually active during the “profligate years” now possesses what might be called a graveyard of memories. Every now and then, you remember someone you had a sexual encounter with, and you wonder, “Did he survive?” Every gay writer, of whatever age, has been influenced by that climate pervaded by the awareness of early death. I believe that a literature of urgency and anger is resulting. That urgency may be found in the prose itself as well as the content, the compression and intensification of experience. (I think here of Dennis Cooper.)

The enormity of the toll AIDS has taken on the artistic landscape has yet to be grasped. How many works of art die with the early death of an artist? How many characters will never be born?

Castillo: Does that vision inform your own work?

Rechy: My view of the world is very bleak. The older I become, the more I understand a sentence that appeared in my first novel back in 1963: “It's possible to hate the filthy world and yet to love it with an abstract, pitying love.” I increasingly view life as a trap, shaped by all the meanness and ugliness human beings (especially in the guise of religion and morality!) are capable of. Yet here we are. So, out of hope, spurious hope,

some good occurs. I think that the most despairing writing still has a form of “hope” at its core. Otherwise, the only reaction would be silence. I often tell my writing students that the only unassailable reason I can see for living is that it provides a *reasonable* antecedent for the artistic creation.

Chicano/Latino Literary Forms and Traditions

Castillo: Teresa de Lauretis has written that the “relatively greater scarcity of works of theory by lesbians and gay men of color may have been also a matter of different choices, different work priorities, different constituencies and forms of address.” (1) Do you agree or disagree that there is a greater scarcity of such works of theoretical positioning? Why? (2) If you agree with de Lauretis that people of color may have to respond to different choices/priorities/constituencies, what are some of the factors involved?

Rechy: I’m sure you’ve already become aware that I’m not quite well informed on current critical theory. But I do agree with the fact of its scarcity. In relation to gay males, a main factor is that at a time when such explorations would be developing, AIDS struck with such impact that everything else became secondary. In the ’70s and early ’80s emphasis on sexual activities to the point of bludgeoning excess was so pronounced that questioning, or even exploring, what was occurring was considered treacherous. I think that caused theoretical writers to pull back. Prominent intellectuals like George Stambolian and Richard Hall, two of the best gay critics, are now dead. David Ehrenstein, a black journalist-critic, is doing some fresh viewing of the literary front, surveying a wide spectrum that allows for work by minorities.

Back to de Lauretis’s view that people of color may have to respond to different priorities: gay people of color are quite often socioeconomically deprived, and so they have to deal with the ostracizing created by sexual persuasion *and* that created by class status. This produces problems different from those of the white male homosexual, with, often, vaster economic options. Sad to say, there do exist gay racists. There’s even a Gay Republican Club.

Castillo: Tomás Almaguer says, “Chicano men who embrace a ‘gay’ identity (based on the European-American sexual system) must reconcile this sexual identity with their primary socialization into a Latino culture that does not recognize such a construction: there is no cultural equivalent to the modern ‘gay man’ in the Mexican Latin-American sexual system.”

Rechy: True. Mexican culture adds hateful factors to the forming of a solid homosexual identity, in main part because of the power of the Catholic church, although I would say a majority of priests and high prelates are themselves gay. Perhaps because of their entrenched view of women as either virgins or whores—the adoration of Our Lady of Guadalupe by so many Mexican men adds to this factor. Hispanic heterosexuals, still so determinedly “macho,” often seem to think that in order to be “men” they must denounce homosexuals, and do so fiercely at times. Many Mexican men still feel they have to devote at least three hours—give or take an hour or two—each weekend, to ogle and insult women on city streets, and to heckling queens.

Gay-bashing perpetrated by Hispanic males is particularly prevalent and violent in Los Angeles and other American cities. In some Latin countries the murder of homosexuals by death squads is condoned—all legacies of the entrenched culture of machismo, and of the Catholic church.

I resent the current reference to “Catholic-bashing” used to describe verbal criticism of the Catholic church. The phrase is taken from “gay-bashing,” and *that* is real bashing—beating, bloodying, savage assaults, murder, not the softened criticism prelates of the church so misguidedly describe as “bashing.”

Most forms of oppression against women and of homosexuals would end tomorrow if the Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant religious hierarchies spoke loudly, with true morality, against such oppression. Instead, their repeated judgments on homosexuals and, more implicitly, on women incite violence, rape, abuse.

Castillo: What impact does this primary socialization within a Latino culture have on literary form?

Rechy: I think the Hispanic Catholic church has a powerful influence on all artists. What artist would fail to be influenced forever by the assault of colors when you enter a church, the shift of lights on stained-glass windows, and the gaudiest paintings in the world? I sometimes—*not always! not always!*—write in “Mexican-Catholic-Church style.” This is a rich, ripe style that comes from early exposure to blood-drenched statues of saints writhing in exhibitionistic agony in churches; statues real and artificial at the same time (like the best art); exposure to the grand melodrama of the journey to Calvary, performed by gorgeous agonized creatures; the operatic excess of Christ’s Seven Last Words; the poetic ritualism of the Stations of the Cross; the glorious extravagance of High Mass, the greatest drag show on earth; the aggressive mourning of Holy Week; the invited, not to say extorted, tears and breast-pounding guilt—all, all overseen by glamorous male and female angels.

Move to the peripheries of that religion, and you have more irresistible factors: the *curanderos*, sightings of the Madonna, *beatas* whose impeccable timing would make Bette Davis weep, the echoing wails of *la Llorona*. Don’t you infer it all, in Orozco’s comic-strip-as-great-art murals? In the rhythm of colors in Rivera’s paintings?

Even in the preceding paragraphs, you find that influence, no?

There’s this, too: Catholicism deals centrally with mystery, which it attempts to solve by “faith.” Abandoning that leap required to accept “faith,” you’re left only with glaring mystery, the awesome mystery that surrounds us constantly, because there’s “no substitute for salvation” (a phrase that appears in all my books), a spurious salvation possible only through “faith.” The best artists, I believe, deal not with solving mysteries but with exploring individual mysteries clearly. I think that much Hispanic art is mysterious—look at entirely different artists like Gabriel García Márquez, Elena Poniatowska, Manuel Puig, Isabel Allende, Octavio Paz. Perhaps one reason why there’s never been a successful production of García Lorca’s dramas in English-speaking countries is that translation automatically disconnects the action (performance) from the “Hispanic Sensibility,” with its tendency toward drama and high melodrama, rich symbolism, even allegory, mythical resonance.

Castillo: How does minority literature reflect on and revise dominant Western literary strategies? Become an alternative model for “literature”?

Rechy: We move again into the problems of “ghettoizing voices.” All categorization that limits the artist is negative. It fascinates me as much as it appalls me that often minorities contribute to this separation, confusing labeled recognition with “success.” This is *literature*; this is *minority literature*. Consider that some of the recently emergent “Chicano writers” have received an amount of mainstream attention, but the sales of such books have been limited; not one has crossed the line enough to become, say, a best-seller. (I’m not saying that’s the goal, just an indication of limitations.)

Before the “ghettoization of literature,” several “minority books” did become best-sellers. My own *City of Night*—whose protagonist, dammit, is Chicano—was a top national best-seller for seven months. *Numbers* and *The Sexual Outlaw*—both of which also have Chicano protagonists—were national best-sellers.

Castillo: I think even your critics have been struck by the richness of symbolic structure in all your works.

Rechy: In all my novels, I extend “realism” into metaphor for deeper meaning. In *City of Night*, I experimented with several literary forms in individual chapters: for

example, the story of a “great homosexual beauty” is told as a Greek tragedy, with chorus. The structure of the last portrait section (“White Sheets”) is borrowed from my fascination with mathematics. I saw the relationship between the two characters in that chapter in terms similar to those involved plotting an algebraic equation on a graph; given several factors, locating the intersection of two lines to determine the exact point of revelation.

In *Numbers*, I was writing about a series of sexual encounters, but the central metaphor is death, dying. In *Rushes*, I wrote about one night in a sado-masochistic bar/orgy room; but its structure is a carefully constructed mass. In *The Fourth Angel*, and in my play based on that novel, *Tigers Wild*, I wrote about Texas teenagers on a rampage; they are also rebelling angels. In *The Vampires*, a lush Caribbean island doubles over as a plush hell. (That novel was as profoundly influenced by the Catholic church as it was by a favorite comic strip, “Terry and the Pirates.”) In *Bodies and Souls*, I commented on the perfection of what we call “accident,” fate seen clearly only in retrospect. In *Marilyn’s Daughter*, I wrote about the act of self-creation—in art, in life, and I used Marilyn Monroe as the epitome of self-conscious art. In *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, I extend the book into surrealism, and then fable.

Again forgive the passion—after all, that is an element of the Hispanic Sensibility! Before *City of Night* appeared in full in 1963 (sections had been printed in literary quarterlies), I was being written about and talked about as an important young writer, by, among others, Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, Ken Kesey, Christopher Isherwood, Herbert Gold, Larry McMurtry. Then a very disturbed man, Alfred Chester, was given column after column of newsprint by the *New York Review of Books* to assault *City of Night*; that review, a malicious mugging disguised as literary criticism, went so far as to question my existence: “I can hardly believe there is a real John Rechy.”

Appearing in the journal that vaunts its literary authenticity while actually being notoriously bigoted, that review, so powerfully strident, influenced the reviews that followed. Richard Gilman’s shrill denunciation in the *New Republic* was almost as vicious, extending Chester’s questioning of my existence, as did a front-page featured review in the *Village Voice* [1 Aug. 1963]. To protect my threatened privacy, I refused to promote the book and spent the first months of its publication in the Caribbean. But the questioning among those venomous men came from a hoping that I did not exist, because my existence disturbed them deeply psychologically. Without the courage to face that, they attacked.

Even today I continue to battle those first assaults that attempted to undo my reputation as a serious writer. Recently, the *New York Review of Books*, which had invited the initial assault, issued a collection of its “representative essays” to be sent to new subscribers. The repulsive review of *City of Night* was included, with its original inflammatory title—“Fruit Salad.” Offensive even at the time it had appeared, it was even more offensive in 1988.

Imagine a comparable title given to a review of a book about women, about blacks, about Jews in a literary journal that purports to be intellectually impeccable? I protested to Barbara Epstein, the editor, and received an apology for using the reckless headline. Last year, in a collection of Gore Vidal’s essays, Vidal, in his foreword, referred to Chester’s review as an example of “high criticism” although “absolutely unfair.” I wrote Vidal in protest and received a letter in which he expressed admiration for *City of Night*, denounced Chester as a “monster,” and claimed that in writing his foreword he had “succumbed” to the monster’s “black arts.” Yet there the praising reference remains in his prizewinning collection.

Writers must protest mistreatment. I do so whenever I detect malice masquerading as criticism. After all, literary history proves over and over that posterity is often much less demanding than the occasional Sunday book reviewer. I have no doubt that the “monster” Chester and his disciple Gilman will exist mainly in derisive footnotes.

I'm gratified by the fact that many of my books, often initially critically attacked, are required reading in literature courses, and continue to be translated virtually every year.

Castillo: These literature courses, until recently, however, have not been the Chicano literature courses you mentioned earlier. How do you respond to critics who complain that you don't deal overtly enough with matters of Chicano identity?

Rechy: At the end of *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, Amalia utters the cry of Mexican liberation: "No more!"

I've always admired the strength of Mexican women, like my mother—and my Amalia, who's entirely different from my mother. The Mexican women I remember from my background are monuments to durability. Yet, to most, they're invisible, or often seen only as maids.

It was largely out of admiration for those women—sustained by their faith—that I created Amalia Gómez, exploring her longing for a miracle, a visit from the Holy Mother, amid all the prejudice and desolation of her life.

Prejudice against Hispanics is still rampant, perhaps growing. Take a drive down the San Fernando Road in Glendale, in California; you'll see defeated Hispanic men anxious to get work, any kind of work. Anglos drive by in their trucks. The workers accept whatever they're offered. On the evening news you'll hear politicians talking about the urgent need to "stop those illegals." Near that Shangri-la of wealth where I teach, USC, there are neighborhoods of poverty, where Hispanic families live in one apartment in shifts, sharing the rent; almost everywhere, people sleep in darkened corners. Drive down Alvarado, see those lovely young Hispanic women, some so fresh here they wear no makeup. They'll take any job as maids. If they're illegal, they'll work for whatever they're paid.

Some people—even middle-class Hispanics—don't know that, don't want to know it, see it—prefer to relegate it to the past. In the sewing factories, today, there are women who work eight hours a day, six days a week for as little as \$60 a week; some bring their children and let them sleep on rolls of cloth—in buildings known as firetraps. These are "invisible women."

At the border at San Diego, at times dozens of Anglos will gather in their cars, to shine their lights, to help entrap illegal aliens. They blow their horns and shout encouragement at "*la migra*." Shootings occur randomly by the border patrol and some self-identified "patriots." Even their own people rob those fleeing across the border, bandit Mexicans preying on their own. Of the currently acknowledged one out of seven people in the country living in official poverty, a huge number must be Hispanics.

When I was a kid in grammar school, in El Paso, Texas, "Mexicans" were regularly inspected for lice, Anglo children watching fascinated. We were separated for an hour to be taught pronunciation—the difference between "ch" and "sh," while Anglo children played outside. We had to sing "Home on the Range," but instead of saying "where seldom is heard a discouraging word" we had to substitute "where never is heard—." Throughout Texas at the time, signs warned "spiks, niggers, and dogs" to stay out.

In the interior of Texas—like gothic Balmorhea—Mexicans were segregated in movie theaters. As a child—in order to be hurt less—I allowed my ethnic identity to remain in limbo, neither denying it nor proclaiming it. When that changed, people would often say to me, "Oh, don't say you're Mexican; you must be *Spanish*"—as if allowing me to escape some terrible judgment. Out of all those early experiences and observations, I wrote some of my first articles, beginning in 1959, about poverty, prejudice against Mexicans, for the *Nation*, *Saturday Review*.

I view *all* discrimination as a hungry evil. It appalls me that so very often minorities discriminate against others. When I hear Chicanos screech "faggot" and read of their initiating gay-bashings—when I learn that some Jews oppose including the names of homosexuals in a memorial to those who died in concentration camps, when I see some



women cops determined to rival male cops as bullies, when I read the rantings and pantings of black conservative-darling Stanley Crouch against homosexuals and black women, when I hear about homosexual nightclubs that exclude women and minorities, I wonder . . . what's the use?

Castillo: What are some of the operative questions for a Chicano writer going into the twenty-first century?

Rechy: Identifying oneself overtly as a “Chicano writer” or “infiltrating,” becoming a literary saboteur. For me, the latter is the more challenging and, finally, the most effective.

Art and Artifice

Castillo: In your book *Marilyn's Daughter*, the organizing image is an instantly recognizable icon of artifice. Can you comment on the importance of artifice in that novel or in your work in general?

Rechy: I'm fascinated by artifice; I never speak about “reality” as a desirable, or possible, element in fiction. In my classes I refer to verisimilitude. I refer to “tricks” that ensure that—techniques. I'm intrigued by similarities in seeming opposites: “Fem” drag queens sprinkled with sequins are very much like “leathermen” all decked out in black straps and glittery studs. In their “macho” rigidity, they become very “gay.” Annoyed by my rigid attitude, a queen on the street once said these words of wisdom to me: “Honey, your muscles are as gay as my drag.” Yes, muscles are as much a decoration as drag, and they do become quite as “gay.”

The narrator in *City of Night* recreates himself, creates a facade to be reacted to. When it drops, at the end of the novel, during Mardi Gras, when everyone else is masked, he's almost destroyed.

For me, Marilyn Monroe is a masterpiece of artifice elevated to art. Her creator was an unwanted young woman named Norma Jeane Baker. Norma Jeane moved from home to foster home, unhappy, unwanted. A superb artist, she created Marilyn Monroe, step by step, all contradictions, lies, variations. Even her origin is in ambiguity—where, from whom, when? Norma Jeane remained a sad, finally tragic woman, abused by the Kennedys, who saw her as a plaything, a needy orphan who called herself “Marilyn Monroe.” But Norma Jeane's creation, the woman we now celebrate as Marilyn Monroe, is a victorious work of art; and by becoming a questioning and integral part of the history of the Kennedys, she triumphs over them. Does art justify a painful life? I don't know. But art does remain, and pain finally dies, no?

My closeness to Marilyn Monroe comes additionally out of the fact that as a gay Chicano, I, too, have had to remake myself constantly. The hustler-narrator of *City of Night* learns poses, adopts them, to mask vulnerability. On the street, he's paid for the role he's playing, like an actor; the artist, the sensitive child, looks on in surprise. In *Numbers*, the protagonist is an extension of the earlier narrator. Here, the narcissism has become even more overt, more consuming: Johnny Rio's creation of himself is more perfected, and so, paradoxically, that renders him even more vulnerable; there's more to break.

In my life, at a certain point when I could no longer be a “youngman,” I took up body-building, easing over the transition from “youngman” to “man.”

Castillo: What kind of growth would you like to see in your readers?

Rechy: Like many other writers, I feel that my writing has been misunderstood, or, rather, misviewed. The subject material of my first novel disturbed so many closeted male reviewers psychologically that they did not even look for literary quality. I have always been a literary writer, very dedicated to form. In *City of Night* I deliberately wanted to capture the rhythms of rock and roll. My attention to form has increased with each book I write.

As an example, I'll expand on what I said before about my novel *Rushes*. In it, I write about one night in a leather bar, a night that ends up in an S & M orgy room. The novel is structured as a mass: The bar is described to look like an altar. The characters locate themselves in the positions of priest and acolytes during Mass. On the walls of the Rushes Bar there are sketchy erotic drawings. These find parallels in the Stations of the Cross, the last panel fading into unintelligible scrawls, to suggest the ambiguity of the possible Fifteenth Station. There is a "baptism" and an "offertory." At the end a metaphoric crucifixion and an actual one (gay-bashing) occur simultaneously, one inside the orgy room, the other outside. The novel/mass ends with a surrendered benediction.

Still, today, I find myself viewed as a writer whose primary contribution is one of uncovering once-taboo subjects—in my first book. I hope eventually my whole work will be viewed beyond subject matter.

Castillo: Can you outline the development of your oeuvre? Do you see it as showing distinct phases or transformations? What are its continuities? Discontinuities?

Rechy: I'm surprised at times to write down a thought for including in a future book and then finding that same thought in an earlier book of mine. Obviously themes recur. I find myself moving away from so-called "realism." I think, of the literary forms, autobiography is the most fraudulent, because the author claims: "This is true, I lived it." But it's no longer being lived, it's being remembered, selectively. The next most fraudulent form is biography: The author dares to assume he can grasp another's life! The most honest of the literary forms is . . . fiction. The writer says, "This is a lie and I'm going to try like hell to convince you it's true."

Castillo: Is there anything you'd like to disinherit? Unpublish?

Rechy: Yes, my third novel, *This Day's Death*, although it does contain a good portrait of a Mexican woman, Miss Lucia.

Castillo: What are your most urgent projects now?

Rechy: I would like to live to see my novel *Bodies and Souls*, which I often consider my best, reissued in a wonderful edition and for it to receive the attention I believe it deserves. It's an epic novel that attempts to define contemporary America through a view of Los Angeles today, a disturbed modern paradise populated by still-rebelling "angels." Its gallery of characters includes a pornographic actress, a Mr. Universe; a bag-woman, a Chicano teenager, a gothic female evangelist, a black maid from Watts, a male stripper, a TV anchorwoman, a wealthy judge in Bel Air, many others. Winding peripherally through those lives are a young woman, Lisa, and two young men, Orin and "Jesse James"—"lost angels" who bring about the book's apocalyptic ending. Throughout, I evoke scenes out of classic American films like *White Heat*. The ending evokes that of *Duel in the Sun*.

Bodies and Souls was ambushed by a series of circumstances that began right after it was finished. Because of my loyalty to my original publishers, Grove Press, which had at the time almost stopped publishing, I accepted a good offer from my very talented editor there, who was then forming his own publishing house. He wanted to make *Bodies and Souls* the new company's first book. A dream come true—a major new company's first original book—turned into a writer's nightmare I regret virtually every day of my life. When the offer for the book was made, I had quickly instructed my agent to withdraw the novel from several other prominent publishers who wanted it. What followed was one of those ambushes that make a writer ask, "My God, it's difficult enough; what's next?"

The hardcover edition that was published was, at best, makeshift—actually ugly—printed on gray paper, without endsheets, bound so clumsily that the spine broke on the very first opening. There were hundreds of typographical errors, pages printed askew, the type running off the margins. The trade edition, published simultaneously, was equally ragged. I constantly wonder why I didn't demand publication be stopped until a new edition was printed, but the book was already advertised, and in the bookstores.

Written from advance galleys before the shoddy edition was seen, two excellent reviews appeared, one in the *New York Times Book Review*, which borrowed my description of Los Angeles to call the book “a scarred beauty”; and one in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, which lauded it as a “memorable feast.” A few more fine reviews appeared. But as soon as the shoddy edition was seen, reviews stopped. The incorrect perception was that a book brought out in such condition must have been rejected by everyone—and of course that was not so.

At my insistence, eventually the publishers did release fair hardback and trade editions—pages straightened, typographical errors corrected, a sturdier binding. Subsequently, a good paperback edition was issued. All remain in print, including, alas, the terrifying editions. The novel did appear to praise in England, and recently was published in Italy. A Spanish edition is pending.

I hope I’ll live to see that book assigned its rightful place, because—I’m not going to hesitate to say it—it’s a grand achievement.

I’ve just finished *Our Lady of Babylon*, the title a reference to the Whore of Babylon in the Book of Revelation. It’s a novel about a woman who claims she was Eve—and Salome and Delilah and Helen and Medea—and *la Malinche*—all women blamed for enormous catastrophes, and called “Whores.” She sets out to redeem them. I’m working on two other novels: *Love in the Backrooms: The Sequel to “City of Night”* (it moves from 1963 to 1993); and *Autobiography: A Novel*.

In *Autobiography: A Novel*, I’m trying to re-create—or, more accurately, to imagine—the lives of my father, my mother, their families, a saga that ranges from Mexico City into the United States: my father’s family ties to Porfirio Díaz, my mother’s flight from Chihuahua to avoid Pancho Villa’s amorous advances. I’ll dramatize scenes as they might have occurred in their lives, as I might have viewed them if I had been there: my mother dancing at a ball in Chihuahua as a young girl—how I might have courted her if I had been one of her suitors; my father challenging his “aristocratic” and autocratic mother. I’m trying to achieve a unique fictional “truth,” imagined out of what I’ve been told are facts, facts being nothing more than the memories that survive, that are told—all already altered by that selectivity, memory being the first editor.

I have from the beginning of my writing (I began my first novel at age eight) wanted to give order to the anarchy of experience. That’s possible only in art. There’s no “truth” in art. The greater the artist, the greater the lie. Like a magician, the artist convinces us that what we’re “seeing” is “real,” true, whereas it’s all trickery, grand artifice, wonderful lies, including the ones that memory harbors.

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